



The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has wreaked havoc on our nation and world. We have been in a time of concentrated grief and lasting illness. Yet, we are not without hope or an answer. As the virus continues to spread and more variants are discovered, people of faith can play an important role in helping to end this historic pandemic that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands in our nation and millions globally. Vaccines have provided us with a way out of this nightmare and a way forward living into the new normal.

According to the latest research*, church and faith leaders can successfully encourage people to get vaccinated. Some religious Americans, including Christians of color and White mainline Protestants, have indicated that certain religious approaches made them more likely to get vaccinated. They have responded favorably to these situations:

- A religious leader encouraged you to get the vaccine.
- A member of a local religious community you trust addressed your concerns about the vaccine or got the vaccine.
- A healthcare professional from a local religious community you trust addressed your concerns about the vaccine.
- A local religious community you trust held a forum to discuss the safety of the vaccine, challenged misinformation about the vaccines that you have been reading online, created informational materials that answer common questions about the vaccine, or provided assistance in getting an appointment to get the vaccine.
- You could get the vaccine at a nearby religious congregation.

Scriptural Basis for a Compassionate Response

As Christians, our faith tradition is clear and consistent about how we are to treat others. We are taught that each person is made in the image and likeness of God and we are to be concerned about their well-being. Christ, as our example, reminds us in both his words and his actions that how we treat the most vulnerable matters to God. Indeed, there are different interpretations of scriptures and while some have tried to distort our sacred texts to justify discouraging people from taking the vaccine, the ones highlighted below amplify the importance of how taking a safe and proven vaccine that can save lives is not only an act of faith, it is also a moral choice and the right thing to do.

'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. Mark 12:31 NRSV

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2 NRSV

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Philippians 2:4 NRSV

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Ephesians 2:10 NRSV

Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. James 1:13-18 NRSV

Responding to Biblical Misinformation

In any crisis situation, conspiracy theories and misinformation can take root. It's important for us to be discerning about the information we receive and pray for guidance about how to act on the information. During the pandemic, there have been numerous misinterpretations of Christian scriptures and conspiracy theories about the vaccine that have made their way through social and other media, resulting in people not getting life-saving protection from the virus. These distortions have put people in harm's way and some have even lost their lives. Here are a few ways to respond in love to biblical misinformation that is being shared:

- God's love for us does not shield us from the suffering of this world. Scripture reminds us that God, "...makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)
- Getting vaccinated is one of the ways we show care and love for our neighbors. While we may never contract the virus or get seriously ill if we do, we could still spread the virus and put someone else's life in jeopardy. God calls us to bear one another's burdens and to protect the most vulnerable (Galatians 6:2, Matthew 25). In this way, taking the vaccine is an expression of our faith, not a lack of it.
- Each generation of Christians has been able to identify signs that point to the end times. It is always helpful for us to remember that Jesus was clear about what he knew would be ongoing speculation about his return. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Right before ascending into heaven, he reminded the disciples of this uncertainty, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." While we are watchful and discerning, we also must recognize with humility that we know in part and we prophesy in part (1 Corinthians 13:9). In the meantime, we are charged with caring for one another. We have a responsibility to lean into hope and trust that God, who inspires scientists and medical professionals, has provided for us a solution to the pandemic for the benefit of all.
- Reason together with your faith community in actively discerning how to responsibly move forward.

Communication Advice

As with all courageous conversations, listen and acknowledge concerns. Share your personal vaccination story or experience. Demonstrate empathy. Educate by discussing the importance of all vaccines, not only for COVID-19. Make the recommendation that the person be vaccinated and support them in making a plan. Provide resources (see below) for people to look over and share with their loved ones as they consider getting vaccinated. Make sure everyone in your congregation or faith organization is sharing the same information from trusted sources.

Resources:

Guide to Supporting Vaccine Confidence for Church and Community Leaders (HHS)

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/faq-and-guide-for-faith-and-community-leaders.pdf>

Black Faith Community Vaccine Toolkit <https://blackfaithvaccinetoolkit.org/>

How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation (CDC) <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/health-departments/addressing-vaccine-misinformation.html>

Faiths4Vaccines Resources <https://faiths4vaccines.org>

We are all in this together. Working collaboratively with each other's well-being in mind, we can make a difference and shine light in this darkness by getting vaccinated.

**Survey designed and conducted by PRRI and IFYC among a random sample of 5,366 adults (ages 18 and over) between October 18 and November 9, 2021*